1: Jenness--228-229 (1913-16) 1922 Copper Eskimo
116, 521

"Let us consider first how the limitations of their environment and their ignorance of the great world outside of them react on the minds of these Eskimos. Naturally, we find it reflected in the circumscribed range of their ideas, noticeable more particularly in their topics of conversation. The men are thinking and talking always of their hunting, their fishing, and their sealing. When the hunter returns to camp, every little incident of the day, how he saw a caribou from the top of a ridge, the character of the country, his careful stalking, how he crawled on hands and knees, what the deer was doing, his shooting, the action of the wounded animal, how he skinned it, the thickness of its back-fat and the excellence of its fur, how he packed it home and the other tracks that he came upon, all these are repeated over and over again, down to the minutest detail, to everyone who enters the house. The other hunters describe their adventures, and the women interrupt now and then with a question or an exclamation, or retail the most recent item of gossip around the settlement. The same questions are asked, the same requests made again and again, and so the conversation continues. Even less than with us does it rise to the height of abstract reflection, or to a contemplation of the nature and purpose of the things by which mankind [229] is surrounded."

lines, harpoon lines, and lashings of various kinds. No doubt the Copper Eskimo in emergencies made use of sinew from other sources, for the Mackenzie Delta natives sometimes use the sinew on the tail of the fox, which is about a foot long and said to be of excellent quality.

After the flesh had been carefully scraped away the sinew was allowed to dry a little; but as prolonged exposure to the heat of the sun rendered it stiff and brittle, it was generally stored away at once in a bag. The value of a slab of back sinew was fairly high everywhere along the Arctic coast.[1] Caribou were very abundant in the Copper Eskimo country until about 1919, but in the absence of linen or cotton thread—which in any case is less suitable for skin garments—sinew was in such great demand that it was constantly traded from one family or group to another.

For ordinary sewing a thin strand was stripped off the slab with the teeth or thumb nail, drawn through the teeth to remove all roughness, and rolled against the cheek to twist it into a single smooth thread. Waterboots, however, called for a stouter three-ply thread, made by the women and girls in the house, where they fastened the ends of the threads to the drying rack, and caught the middle strand between the second and third fingers while they crossed the two outer ones with the thumbs and index fingers. Fishing lines of leg sinew were plaited similarly of three strands, but the harpoon lines, which required to be flat, had from four to eight strands, sometimes even more. Twisting, as with rope, was an unknown art.

Sewing Bags and Baskets. A Copper Eskimo woman without her needle and thread would have been as uncomfortable as a European housewife without her knitting. Sewing was no impediment to gossip: the woman sat on the sleeping skins, her legs doubled under her or stretched out in front, and plied her needle and her tongue at the same rate. Always she sewed from right to left; only a left-handed person sewed in the opposite direction. She held the thimble on the first finger (not on the middle, as we do), and pushed the needle through the skin with the side of the thimble, not with its top, if indeed it had a top. Then she caught the point between the thumb and middle finger, drew the needle out, turned it on its side, and with her thimble behind it pulled through the thread and reinserted the needle for the next stitch. Usually she did not tauten the thread until the second stitch.

There was more sewing to be done at certain seasons than at others. Thus, in the autumn, all the new clothing for the winter had to be finished before the sun disappeared below the horizon for the long winter night. The women then sewed from early morning until late at night, with only brief respites to cook the meals or to pass the time of day with neighbours. A woman who had no children to sew for was, of course, less busy; the mother of a family was obliged not only to make the clothes for the whole household, but to train her girls to be dressmakers also. The latter began their training with odd scraps of skin, which they learned to join with neat close stitches. Later, they mended rents in their own clothing, and made dolls fully clothed from head to foot. Many men could make their own trousers and socks, and even sealskin shoes in an emergency; but only a very few could cut out a well-fitting coat or make a pair of waterboots that would really keep out the water. Even the women never attained great skill in these last-mentioned tasks until long after marriage, and a young wife often sought the assistance of an older relative or friend.

The work-basket of most women was a bag of caribou or some other skin, or else, more rarely, a neatly worked basket of coiled willow twigs held in place with willow-bark stitching (Figures 91, 92). All the baskets that I saw were

[1] In 1914 the price of one slab of reindeer back sinew at Barrow, Alaska, was $1.

[TEXT CONTINUED ON PAGE 90]

29: Jenness E-5 (1914-1916) 1959
ND8 Copper Eskimo ND8

and party until the official program came to an end. Some of the more elderly natives, wearied with the eight hours' continuous performance, then retired to rest; but the younger kept up the dancing until early morning.

During the two days that followed, gossip and barter divided the hours with informal dances. Our visitors watched me furtively. Only one white man had crossed their lives before, and even he had vanished before they knew him intimately, or could assure themselves that he really came from that far-distant corner of the earth where a great pole props up the sky. They remembered the legend which said that Eskimos, Indians, and white men were originally brothers, their mother a beautiful woman who rejected every suitor until her father's dog, metamorphosed into a handsome young man, visited her and won her love. She herself went down to the ocean floor to preside over the waves, the fish, and the sea mammals; but her children scattered in all directions. Only the Eskimos remained human; the Indians kept their human forms, but became like wild beasts at heart; and the white men degenerated into monsters even in outward appearance.

So the Tormiat followed all my movements with the utmost curiosity. They still thought their legend partly true, and waited expectantly for evidence of my "monstrosity." Icehouse herself, my adopted mother,